

No Nuclear Compromise

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Articles & Testimony

The Iranian regime will not be able to survive existing sanctions, which are targeting the banking system and oil industry like never before.

Aspecter is haunting the Middle East: The specter of the nuclear bomb. Iran's potential nuclear capability worries Middle Eastern countries -- including its immediate neighbors. Not only does Israel see a nuclear Iran as an existential threat, but also Arab countries -- especially members of the Gulf Cooperation Council -- consider an Iranian atomic bomb as an ultimate factor in changing the region's balance of power to their disadvantage.

This year an international conference will be held in Finland, on ridding the Middle East of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD). But the dream of a Middle East as a WMD free zone is fading fast. Saudi Arabia and UAE have not only tried to acquire more weaponry and equip themselves with cutting-edge military technology, but they are also justifying the idea of launching a nuclear program. Other countries in the region -- including Turkey -- are also on this path.

The only hope for a Middle East nuclear free-zone is to stop Iran from reaching nuclear capability. While Israeli nuclear capability primarily aims to protect a country surrounded by enemies, Iran's attempt to obtain such capability remains unjustifiable in the eyes of the West and also neighboring countries -- who have made it a priority to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions. Without Saudi Arabian and Gulf countries' intensive efforts in enforcing sanctions on Iran, the Islamic Republic would not be as economically and politically isolated as it is today. With this year's escalation in sanctions, Saudi and other Persian Gulf states have demonstrated that they are ready to compensate for the loss of Iranian oil to European markets, by meeting the shortfall. In this way harsher sanctions on Iran will have little impact on the oil market, paving the way for the sustained isolation of Iran.

The Islamic Republic has many reasons for seeking to attain nuclear weapons. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei firmly believes that the ultimate goal of the West in pressuring Iran over its nuclear program is not the end of the program itself, but an attempt to destroy the regime. For him, the Islamic Republic and the West are inherently at odds. After the decline of Communism in the world, Khamenei held that Iran represented a new pole --

political Islam -- opposing the other pole, namely, the West. In his Manichaeism view, the battle of good and evil will continue until good wins. Any compromise with the West, let alone normalizing the relationship, is against the nature of the Islamic Republic.

For Iran's supreme leader, what is at stake is regional supremacy. Since the US and its allies have achieved hegemony in the Middle East, they are able to squeeze Iran whenever they want, on whatever issue they please. Gaining nuclear capability would change this course and make it harder for the West to impose its will on Iran.

In a recent speech on 22 February, Ayatollah Khamenei stated, "Iran's future and national interests depend on the scientific and technological advances in nuclear technology...If nations can independently achieve advances in the nuclear areas, aerospace, technology, science and industry, then there will no longer be any room for the bullying hegemony of the superpowers." He continued: "The sanctions have been there since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, but the nuclear issue is a recent development. Therefore, [the West's] main problem is that there is a nation that is determined to become independent, a nation that is not prepared to give in to oppression, a nation that is determined to expose oppressors, a nation that wants to tell other nations that it has achieved this goal and that it will make even more accomplishments."

Compromise is a frightening word for Ayatollah Khamenei. He dislikes such tactics either in dealing with his domestic enemies or in handling foreign policy. In a meeting with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, Khamenei advised that any move that weakens resistance will work against the future of Muslim nations. He reiterated: "It is necessary to constantly guard against the infiltration of compromising elements into the resistance groups." This clearly reflects what he thinks about several issues other than the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the course of the last 23 years, Khamenei successfully sabotaged all efforts to seriously engage with the US or any attempt that aimed to build confidence at a diplomatic level. Former presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, who expressed their willingness to solve the nuclear standoff through diplomatic means, have been marginalized and seen as dangerous threats to the authority of the supreme leader. Khamenei has made "resistance" a sacred word and desires to be regarded in the Muslim world as the ultimate representative of the idea.

Pakistan and Libya are important lessons for Iran. Libya gave up its nuclear program and the regime was overthrown with NATO assistance. Pakistan acquired a nuclear program and the government is recognized by the West despite all the troubles it makes.

In the 1980's Iran experienced eight years of war with Iraq, which led to hundreds of thousands of casualties. Many elements in the Islamic Republic believe that if Iran had nuclear capabilities thirty years ago, the devastating war would not have happened. Now Iran sees itself surrounded by enemies and has failed to establish good relations with most Arab countries (except Syria). Arab Sunni powers accuse Iran of trying to proselytize Shi'ism throughout the Arab world, to spread its revolutionary ideology and mobilize Arabs against their governments. Iran rejects these charges and emphasizes that its ideology is not sectarian but rather pan-Islamic. A cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia is playing out inside and outside both countries. Iran accuses Saudi Arabia of supporting armed groups in the Baloch and Kurdish provinces of Iran, while Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of funding Shi'ites in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, Saada in the north of Yemen and also Bahrain. Rival groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinian territories benefit from different degrees of support from Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Iran's guarded path to a nuclear program increases the possibility of an arms race in the region. Recently, in an interview with Associated Press, Prince Turki Al-Faisal of Saudi Arabia -- who advocates the idea of five permanent US Security Council members to guarantee a nuclear security umbrella for Middle Eastern countries to join a nuclear free-zone -- said the Gulf countries are committed to not acquiring WMDs, "but we're not the only players in town. You have Turkey. You have Iraq, which has a track record of wanting to go nuclear. You have Egypt. They had a very vibrant technology energy program from the 1960s. You have Syria. You have other players in the area that could

open Pandora's Box." Obviously Saudi Arabia, as the Prince suggests, would not fall behind in this hypothetical arms race: "What I suggest for Saudi Arabia and for the other Gulf states...is that we must study carefully all the options, including the option of acquiring weapons of mass destruction. We can't simply leave it for somebody else to decide for us."

Under such circumstances, the only hope for a Middle East nuclear free-zone is to stop Iran from reaching nuclear capability. The idea of sanction-based containment may work with regard to Iran, but would not discourage other countries in the region from going nuclear. Such a strategy could not prevent Iran from providing nuclear technology and know-how to other countries. Iranian officials, including President Mahmoud Amadinejad, have reiterated several times that Iran is ready to provide such services to other Muslim countries. Containment might have worked so far with countries like North Korea and Pakistan but has not created any impediment for them to smuggle nuclear technology and knowledge to countries like Iran.

The mixed policy of sanctions and covert operations (such as infiltrating computer systems and assassinating nuclear scientists) is the current Western policy, which aims to decelerate the Iranian nuclear program and force Iran to come back to the negotiation table. But there are some difficulties here. Sanctions and punitive efforts are perceived by Iran's leaders as the West's strategy to topple the regime by crippling the economy and isolating the country. When this strategy is combined with Western declarations about human rights and the democratic movement in Iran, this leaves little doubt in the minds of senior government figures that the hidden agenda is 'regime change.' Ayatollah Khamenei even believes that Western cultural invasion of Iran pursues the total destruction of Islamic ideology and the empowerment of liberal secular forces in Iranian society. Paranoid Iranian leaders believe that even students of humanities in academia, journalists, artists, writers, women, human rights activists and fashion designers are either the West's covert agents or "unpaid soldiers" of the West's army in its soft war with Iran.

Is the West able to convince Iran that its policy is not to change the regime, but rather the cessation of Iranian nuclear ambitions? As long as Ayatollah Khamenei is in charge of the country, it would be almost impossible for the West to do so. Khamenei may change his perception of the West's goal if the US, EU and UN sanctions are lifted before any serious negotiations, but this seems very unrealistic. Besides, it may be interpreted by Iran's leader as a deceptive move.

Iran will not be able to survive existing sanctions, which unprecedentedly target the banking system and oil industry. It is a futile attempt to convince Iran's leader that regime change is not Western policy. Whatever the interpretation of sanctions by Iran's leaders is, the world should put maximum effort on enforcing current sanctions. An unbearable economic crisis is occurring in Iran and it would certainly divide the circle of policy makers, especially the influential Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. This would most likely bring significant change to Iran's nuclear policy.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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